Educational Leadership: Challenges in United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to reform its educational system to enhance the country's ability to compete in the rapidly emerging global economy. This paper examines the development of the UAE's educational system and/or the educational reformation movement. Additionally, this paper also examines the importance of educational leadership to the future of the UAE and the multiple factors influencing the nation's ongoing reformation of its educational sector. The study utilizes a meta-analysis of the existing literature to identify major themes driving and/or shaping these changes. The findings are intended to foster a greater understanding of the nation's efforts at educational reform and enlighten the findings of existing research.

Keywords: *United Arab Emirates, Education, History, Reform*

Introduction

Sheikh Zayed bin Sulṭan Al Nahyan, considered one of the driving forces behind the formation of the United Arab Emirates, once stated, "The wealth of any nation is its intellectuals, and the progress of people and nations is judged by the level and extent of education they reach." According to Alhebsi, Pettaway and Waller (2015) the UAE views education as the foundation of human development and as encompassing aspects beyond traditional educational curricula, educational institutions and academic infrastructure concerns, but also a plethora of complex, multi-layered concerns. Additionally, the UAE has long recognized the importance of strategic planning as a means to fortify educational development and enhance the development of a diverse and competitive economy.

This emphasis on education as an agent for fostering a nation's global competiveness has brought educational leadership to the limelight as a matter of extreme importance (Iskander, Pettaway, Waller, & Waller, 2016). Numerous countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, the USA, Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia have begun shifting attention and resources into the development of effective educational leadership (Moorosi & Bush, 2011). Throughout these countries, a renewed emphasis upon improving leadership capacity and competence has taken root. With this intense emphasis on educational leadership, performance benchmarking and universal performance standards have undoubtedly become synonymous with educational reform.

Today's global environment has seen a growing consensus about the methods and approaches that contribute to effective educational leadership development (Moorosi & Bush, 2011). Bottery (2004) issued a call to arms for the development of effective educational leaders with his assertion that the improvement of educational leadership constitutes a matter of extreme national concern. For these and many others reasons, the examination of any nation's efforts to reform its educational system is of paramount importance.

Literature Review

The true definition of leadership has been a controversial topic since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Eileen Ford, co-founder of Ford Models, one of the earliest and internationally best-known modeling agencies in the world, defines leadership as "the ability to convince people that they want to do what you want them to do as if they had thought of it themselves" (Karnes & Bean, 1993). Eileen Ford's perspective of leadership shares the structure proposed by Robert House (1971). Similarly, Howard Gardner, an American developmental psychologist, defined a leader as a person who could get other people to do what he wanted them to do-- and like it (Gardner & Laskin, I995). Kouzes and Posner (2009) suggest that leadership is the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations. These two researchers outline a set of five practices of exemplary behaviors, which support leaderships in this effort to mobilize others. These five aspects are: modeling behaviors, inspiring others to embrace the organization's shared vision, challenging the current organizational processes, enabling others to act and encouraging positive emotional reinforcement.

Strong school leadership is extremely important to the overall change process. School reform often requires leadership that is able to implement structural changes that support the development of educational environments where teachers and students can perform at their optimal levels (Fisher & Waller, 2013). Educational leadership has also been described as the

process of enlisting and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, pupils, and parents toward achieving common educational aims (Waller & Waller, 2014). Hence, after considering the variance of these two seemingly similar definitions; it becomes clear that the major difference between leadership and educational leadership is that one focuses on managing behaviors, whilst the other concentrates more on creating an environment that is supportive of positive change.

Educational Leadership Challenges

Educational leadership faces many challenges. Micro level challenges are those problems that often express themselves at the school level. Macro level challenges usually express themselves at the policy and/or governmental level. Micro level educational leadership challenges often stem from the failure to crate cohesion within the organization. Change management researchers have traditionally grappled with the problem of how to get everyone onboard (Fisher & Waller, 2013). Although organizations set and modify mission and vision statements, inspiring administrators and employees to embrace the new organizational directions, is not a simple task. It is also not uncommon for school leadership to have limited control over primary as well as tertiary educational environmental factors. All of these factors should be considered before budgetary concerns existing at both the macro and micro level can be effectively addressed.

On a macro level the ferocity of change as a result of the development of new technologies has increased the overall pace of change within all business sectors, from a jog to a sprint. Additionally, creative destruction and globalization have had far-reaching impacts on everyone. Primarily, through the interdependence of global economies as supported first by global trade deals (such as NAFTA and GATT), which laid the groundwork to further establish and reinforce global economic dependencies. Although, globalization may not often be recognized as a contributing factor of the UAE's educational systems, the economic downturns, experienced during the 2008 global recession inevitably produced economic run-off that influenced all economic sectors—globally. Even though, the educational sector is not usually referred to directly, when one is considering the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, many direct implications of the economic downturn reverberated through the educational sectors as a result of the financial crisis. Hence, one begins to understand that the disequilibrium experienced by all business sectors during the 2008 global finical crisis was a manifestation of the interdependence of global financial markets, a residual effect of the past twenty years of extreme globalization (Lumadue & Waller, 2013a; Koch, 2011).

Many scholars have described globalization differently. According to Lumadue and Waller (2013b), globalization may refer to the transfer, adaptation and development of values, knowledge, technology, and behavioral norms across countries and societies in different parts of the world. Globalization is also recognized as the increasing interdependence of the world's inhabitants, on an economic, technological, cultural, and political level. Globalization has acquired many meanings with some of these meaning being the polar opposites of the others. Globalization has been referred to as a strong force that helps people of this world to achieve economic success. On the other hand, globalization has also been blamed for many modern, sometimes disparaging popular trends. For these reasons globalization has indirectly become a major factor responsible for the facilitation and the formulation of ideas about education and leadership worldwide (Friedman, 2006). Unintentionally, globalization has also managed to rescript the narratives of educational leadership. By providing accurate and current data,

feedback and analysis of examples of regional and global best-practice, globalization is often credited for having resulted in the raising of the bar relating to student performance outcomes.

Education Leadership Challenges in UAE

The educational sector in the UAE has played a central role in the country's ongoing development aims and has become a central focus for reform and improvement (Alhebsi, Pettaway & Waller, 2015). Although educational attainment levels have made significant leaps and bounds since the country's inception, there are still major challenges the UAE's public education sector. Two major concerns facing leadership in the educational sector include preparing students and leadership to collaborate effectively within a global context in light of the far-reaching effects of micro and macro-economic influences (Iskander, Pettaway, Waller & Waller, 2016).

Global Challenges

Knowledge of global educational standards has resulted in educational leaders redirecting their teachers to consider ways they might align UAE students' performance standards with leading global performance standards. By encouraging teachers to think globally educational administrative leadership teams in the UAE hope to prepare students for a more challenging world, where achievement depends on one's individual ability to navigate varying cultures, languages and practices as well as develop complex evolving skill-sets (Benjamin, 1999). These skill-sets are indicative of what is often referred to as a global education. According to the Global Education Network, global education is an active learning process based on the universal values of tolerance, solidarity, equality, justice, inclusion, co-operation and nonviolence (Al-Suwaidi, 2011; Boone, Hendricks, & Waller, 2014).

Although many different strategies may be effectively employed for achieving global educational competencies these strategies are usually not enough unto themselves. A global education quite often requires an integrative vertical and horizontal approach, exposing the student to a plethora of alternative epistemological and ontological possibilities. Additionally, a global education requires that educational leadership teams develop a global mindset as well as an understanding of the far-reaching global implications of social, political and economic factors (Lumadue & Waller, 2013c).

Lumadue and Waller (2013c) state that students need a global education to further understand the extent to which new technology, the low-cost of travel and the ease of international exchanges have helped to fashion a heighten degree of interconnectedness which has resulted in the development of an extremely high level of dependency. Abdelkarim and Hann (2002) explain that due to social, cultural and religious traditions, best practices are not always congruent. Hence, it becomes clear that a global education is but one foundational step by which resources can be acknowledged, identified and possibly shared across international boundaries.

The forces of globalization and internationalization have resulted in the development of an environment that requires the citizens and expatriates of the UAE to demonstrate a sophisticated range of skills in order to remain competitive throughout the new millennium (Benjamin,1999). This transitory period is affecting all faces of education in the UAE and consequently placing heavier demands on students, straining existing facilities, and challenging the nation's colleges and universities to respond to the increasingly diverse complex and heighten expectations from

society (Pettaway, Waller, Khodr, & Waller, 2015). A national plan, therefore, will be required if the UAE is to continue to enjoy the full benefits of higher education (Alhebsi, Pettaway, & Waller, 2015).

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has stressed the need for students striving to remain competitive within the UAE's workforce to develop the abilities and skills that will prepare them to navigate the currents of a complex and uncertain world (Al-Suwaidi, 2011). A global education aids in one's understanding the challenges posited by the ever evolving, multicultural and diverse workplace (Shaw, 1997). Educational leaders are often required to collaborate utilizing various capacities evidencing the skills needed to navigate a highly networked, ever-evolving global society (Pettaway, Waller, & Waller, 2015).

Sheikh Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in UAE identified the need to provide a global educational experience and expand the opportunity to more a greater number of the nation's student population (Koch, 2011). The UAE has attempted to address this challenge by offerings short-term learning experiences through study abroad and foreign exchange programs; unfortunately, these programs typically affect but a few students. Lumadue and Waller (2013a) concur with Koch's observations and outline the following five strategies to address the identified challenges and foster global competencies.

1) Provide opportunities for students to develop knowledge and skills through cross-cultural experiences, and we must connect these experiences in a deliberate way.
2) Encourage and support faculty who are striving to include global learning in their classes.
3) Shape institutional culture to support and affirm a global learning emphasis.
4) Implement higher order assessment strategies to measure institutional success.
5) Develop co-curricular opportunities to complement these academic initiatives.

Economy impact on Education in UAE

Generation, selection, assimilation, and application of knowledge are fundamental to the economic growth and well being of any modern society. Economic growth today is a combination of capital accumulation and knowledge accumulation. Benjamin (1999) suggests that workforce education and development should contribute to economic development and lead to better management of resources. Waller (2012) reinforces the importance of the relationship between education and a healthy economy as well as the pivotal role education and training plays in the success of any nation state's prolonged prosperity. This researcher notes the strong correlation between workforce education and economic growth.

Hills and Flesher (1997) note that Shanghai has experienced consistently high rates of per capita growth in Gross National Product (GNP) since 1970, and this growth is strongly correlated with high levels of education in that city. Conversely their research found that countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan with low rates of investment in education experience low rates of economic growth. The research conducted by Hills and Flesher indicates that an investment in workforce development through education is the key to economic and technological development in the UAE.

The UAE have achieved notable improvement since the turn of the century in many areas such as infrastructure, economy, and technology, whilst simultaneously meeting needs of tourism, sports events, art and culture, but education has been under developed when compared to these other sectors (Al-Hinai & Mellahi, 2000). Education has gone through rapid transition at a pace

transitioning from a tribal society to indicative of a modern society making the UAE one of the most prosperous countries in the Arab world (Alhebsi, Pettaway & Waller, 2015). The UAE made the transition by successfully adopting and implementing the educational systems of other countries despite the fact that research has shown that merely implementing another country's educational system does not guarantee a favorable outcome (Ministry of Planning of the United Arab Emirates, 2002).

Conclusion

Educational leadership is fundamental to a nation's ability to compete in a global economy. Educational attainment levels in UAE have made significant gains since the country's inception, yet major challenges remain for the education sector. The future of the nation is contingent upon the educational system's ability to maintain a comprehensive global education program. The skills sets required for success in a global economy require that students be provided opportunities to improve their skills through cross cultural and global interactions.

The demands brought on by rapid globalization are putting immense pressure on educational practices worldwide. These demands must guide evaluation and reform of educational policies, practices, discourses, and curriculum. Educational leaders must recognize that students are being educated for a global economy, yet unknown as the norms of business and society continue to reinvent themselves at a more and more rapid pace. Educational policy makers must be aware that professional education has to be design to sustain long-term economic growth and address societal issues. This study is best summed up by the visionary words of Sheikh Nahyan, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in UAE when he stated, "The government has allocated more than a third of its budget to education, which is a very clear indication that the UAE government is determined to invest in its human capital."

The future of the UAE's economy depends strongly on the strength and visionary response of the nation's educational leadership as they prepare a workforce capable of successfully competing in a modern global economy.

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